THE MURIA AND THEIR GHOTUL

793 There are also in most villages one or more Pujari, as they are now called, who are the priests of the more Hinduized deities, such as Danteshwari and her consort Bangaram. In most villages there are many minor deities and each of these may have its special Pujari.

These men do not form in any sense a special priestly class. Only in very rare instances could you recognize a Gaita or Pujari by his bearing or appearance. They are simple, decent, kindly men who spend most of their lives in the field and forest, but they have been chosen, as their parents were chosen, to mediate between men and the unseen mysterious gods. They are invariably, so far as I know, men of good character and never abuse their position unless the dark fate of supernatural power comes upon them and they turn to black magic. They often have to discipline themselves and to exercise a restraint which is not common among the Muria. All village priests must [785] fast and be chaste on the day and night preceding any major ceremony. In some places the period of abstinence may extend to a week.

In some villages, not all, of the Chota Dongar Pargana the Kaser-Gaita is only able to hold his office until he is married. He is thus usually a boy of about sixteen. He is not allowed to go to the ghotul; he must have as little as possible to do with women; even a woman's shadow must not fall on his body. He should not take tobacco from anyone's hands for fear his wife might be in her period. He should not go to a bazaar for fear he unwittingly touch such a woman. He must not talk to a man whose wife is menstruating. In his own home, his cooking-pot is separate from the others. Few boys could endure so rigorous a regime for long, and the Gaita is only made to hold office for three years. Then the god reveals in a dream which of the chelik should take his place. If the old Gaita returns to the ghotul before he is married, he gives the chelik and motiari a feast of pork and liquor.

793 When a Gaita dies his successor is not immediately appointed. In eastern Kondagaon, although the eldest son inherits the Gaitaship automatically, he 787 cannot exercise his functions until he has had a certain recognized and official dream appointing him and authorizing him to act. In other parts of the State a ceremonial hunt is held before the son or brother of the dead Gaita can take his place. In the name of the dead man, the whole village goes out to hunt and they take the omens from the animals they get. If they kill a hare it means that the dead man disapproves of his son or brother and that the inheritance must pass out of the family. If they get a male animal it means that the dead Gaita does not want a successor at all. If, however, they shoot a female sambhar, chital or barking-deer, they accept this as meaning that the late Gaita's son or brother may be appointed. Should they fail to get one of these animals, they fast the whole day, cook and eat outside their houses in the evening and sleep away from their wives and go out daily to hunt for three days. If within this period they succeed in shooting one or other of the three female animals required, the new Gaita begins his duties forthwith; otherwise they wait for a year and then repeat the test.

793 Throughout tribal India the influence of the priest is greatly modified by that of the seer. Often these functions are combined in the same person, and 791 his influence is thus greatly increased. But at every ceremony, every festival, in all cases of sickness, at the last rites of the dead, the priests have to consult the prophets for their instructions. There is not, in fact, anything like a definite system of ritual which must always be performed in the same manner. There is rather a great repertory of rites and customs from which many possible combinations can be drawn. The prophet or medium of the gods has to explain

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE GHOTUL AND RELIGION

I. The Ghotul Festivals

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THROUGHOUT this book we have seen the important part that the chelik play in the religious life of the tribe. Their success in hunting is the best of omens for the coming harvest; their drumming and dancing adds excitement and delight to the dreariest routine. They serve very much the function of a choir, a choir, moreover, which contains a rather high proportion of theological students. For many of these boys are already training to be clan-priests, Kaser-Gaita or Siraha mediums. At the time of sacrifice the Gaita may take his son and make him perform the actual rite, anxiously watching to see that there is no mistake. At Masora, Lakmu and his son Phirtu carried the Anga on their shoulders together and were moved to and fro by a divine inspiration that came equally to both. I have often seen young chelik dancing in trance, beating themselves with iron scourges, and tossing their dark beautiful hair into wild disorder.

But in addition to being choir-boys and acolytes for their elders, the chelik have festivals of their own which are closely connected with the ghotul. At Diwali, before the motiari go out on their dancing expeditions,[1] the boys and girls collect parched rice and have a feast in the ghotul, at which they admit new members and give them their titles.

At Jhakri, they described how at Diwali the motiari bring parched rice and gur for Tallur Muttai who, in this ghotul, lives in one of the pillars. They offer it first to her, and then all feast together. At Gorma, there was a stone by the village boundary where the children went for this feast. Decorations, sometimes elaborately made with ears of rice and flowers, are strung over the ghotul door.

At Dassera, which is not observed in the villages, the chelik dress one of their number as a Raja, put him on a throne, sometimes even on a wooden chariot; the 'ghotul ryots' bring him presents and he gives gifts to the Diwan, Tahsildar and other State servants. Every boy and girl brings two cucumbers which, in ghotul currency, represent two goats. They stick wooden legs into them and sacrifice them to Danteshwari. They invite a few of the village elders and have a feast in the ghotul.

In some villages—I have noted the custom in the Chalka Pargana—the chelik and motiari have their own version of the Irpu Pandum. At the end of the mahua season they spend three days collecting the flowers—this must be done at the end of the season, for it is believed that after these three days the flowers stop falling—and make liquor for themselves, boiling the flowers in water with slices of mango. If there is a Kalar out-still contractor in the

[1] Such ceremonial parades are not unknown elsewhere. The Chherta and similar dances are common throughout Middle India. 'It is a well-known practice', so C. R. Krishnamacharlu informs me, 'in the Tamil, Telugu and Kanara areas of Southern India for village schoolmasters and their students to go to the several households of the villages singing laudatory songs and receiving presents during the Dassera holidays.' The boys carry decorated bows and shoot sandal powder at their hosts. Krishnamacharlu compares this to the Chelidonia festival of ancient Rhodes, when boys went singing and begging from door to door. See also *The Indian Antiquary*, Vol. II, p. 53 and Vol. III, p. 63.

3: Elwin E-5 (1935-1942) 1943
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brass rings and beads and placed them on the corpse; the 764
men brought bits of cloth. The members of the household fasted from the time of the old man's death until he was cremated. The ceremonies were marked by violent manifestations of grief. When the bamboo bier was brought to the house, the wives of the Waddai, Gaita and Hanagunda fell upon it and lay there. They said that this meant that they too wanted to be taken out and burnt, a curious echo of the Sati tradition. Straw was spread on the bier and when the corpse had been placed there, bits of cloth were laid on it by the male relatives present. The women gathered round the corpse again, kissing it and weeping bitterly. It had been lying with its legs towards the door of the house, but now it was lifted up by the bearers and its position changed so that the head was pointing to the door. They touched the door thrice with it saying, 'You made this house, come here again in your next birth'.

Then, led by the drummers, the corpse was carried out to the cremation-ground. The grand-daughter with her hair undone followed immediately behind the bier throwing rice upon it as she went along. As they passed a path that [792 crossed theirs, they dropped a little rice so that if any other 785] ghost came he would eat it and go away. Everyone went to the funeral. Menstruating women are not normally allowed [841] to attend, though sometimes they may come if they stand at a little distance.

When the party reached the pyre, they went round it anticlockwise once and placed the bier on the ground. Once again the women fell upon the corpse weeping and kissing it. They lay down beside the pyre and had to be pushed away before the business of the funeral could proceed.

Then one of the women put a little tobacco in the mouth of the corpse. The body was placed upon the pyre. Some of the bits of cloth with which it was covered were left there; the rest was distributed between the drummers and the relatives by marriage. The Hanagunda removed the packets of rice which had been tied to the waist of the corpse and threw them to left and right. The body was entirely covered with a cloth and the Hanagunda ripped this open just over the mouth. A piece of grass which had been brought from the roof of the house was put into the mouth of the corpse and